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AF/S FOR S.HILL
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TAGS: ASEC PGOV PHUM PREL ZI
SUBJECT: GOZ BRUTALLY REACTS TO NCA MARCHES

REF: REFTEL: HARARE 1143

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher Dell for reasons 1.5 b/d

¶1. (SBU) The National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) staged marches in key cities across Zimbabwe on September 20 triggering a violent police and ZANU-PF youth militia reaction in Mutare and, to a lesser extent, Harare. Smaller numbers of NCA supporters also marched in Gweru and Masvingo, where some were arrested and briefly detained. These marches came exactly one week after the security forces preempted nationwide marches by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and severely beat several union leaders (reftel). In a statement issued before the marches, the NCA expressed solidarity with the ZCTU and said that "the state had no shame in keeping in custody bleeding citizens" and that "the state seeks to silence all pro-democracy forces by naked brutality.

¶2. (SBU) The largest crackdown occurred in Mutare, where Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights lawyer Trust Manda told poloff that approximately 170 demonstrators were arrested and released later that night after paying admission of guilt fines. (N.B. An independent online newspaper estimates that about 300 activists marched in Mutare.) NCA spokesperson Madock Chivasa told us that many had been beaten and assaulted while in custody. Amani Trust director Francis Lovemore added between 13 and 20 activists were seriously injured and were in medical treatment.

¶3. (SBU) In Harare, Chivasa said that five NCA members had been arrested on September 20 by police, who subsequently turned the activists over to ZANU-PF militia members for a beating. NCA activists described the assaults in Harare as the most brutal of that day and said some of the marchers had been held at ZANU-PF headquarters. Chivasa said they were released a few hours later.

¶4. (SBU) NCA Chairman Lovemore Madhuku suggested to us on

September 21 that the pressure group would be back on the streets tomorrow or early next week.

Comment

15. (C) The violent response to the NCA march, like the ZCTU action before it, shows a weakening and fearful regime that is increasingly determined to suppress any open opposition, however lawful and peaceful. The challenge for Zimbabwe's democratic forces is to remain steadfast against government repression and to realize that time is on their side as the country's economic collapse further saps the regimes ability to crack down.

DELL